Gray Forces Defeated in Battle of Lewisburg

By J. W. Benjamin

On May 23, 1862, soldiers of the North and South met in battle in the little town of Lewisburg.

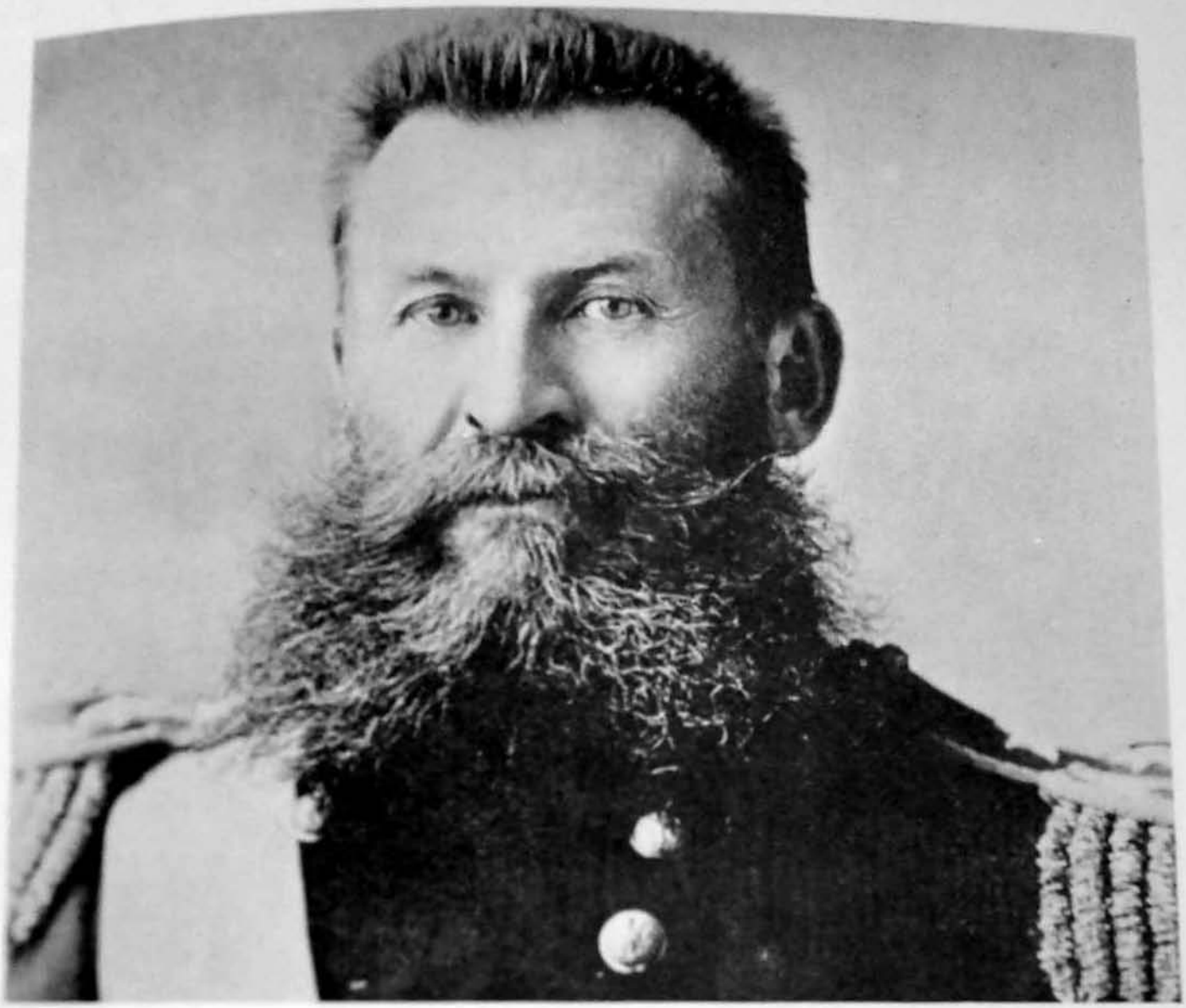
The victorious Union commander, Col. George Crook, passed the first important milestone in a military career which led eventually to fame as enduring as the hills, earned fighting the Indians when Geronimo was running amuck. For the unfortunate loser, Gen. Henry Heth, the Battle of Lewisburg marked the ultimate end of his military advancement.

The late Andrew Price, sage of Pocahontas County and indefatigable historian, commented: "Of all the battlefields that I have studied, I know of none quite so dramatic as Lewisburg (where the battle was), fought in a mountain town, before breakfast, and combining rifle shooting, artillery fire, infantry charges, and cavalry, all in a sleeping little city whose inhabitants awoke to hear the cannon boom and the rifles speak, and who had no time to do anything in the way of escape until it was all over."

Lee, with Wise and Floyd, had been in the Kanawha Valley the previous year. Now Federal forces held the region, rich in salt. In 1862 the South was anxious to regain the valley, and the North wanted to carry the war across the mountains into central Virginia. Lewisburg was in the middle.

Crook, then a colonel and brigade commander, was known as the Grey Fox, evidently a popular sobriquet in those days. He had drilled his men hard all winter. He had built covered sheds so they could drill during bad weather, and had the first really hardboiled army ready for action on either side in the conflict. When he marched from Meadow Bluff along the pike, he was allowed to pass with all the politeness due a body of troops with such very evident fitness to take care of any situation that might arise.

In fact, he marched clear over to Jackson River before he found there was really no enemy nearby for him to fight. There he also learned General Henry Heth was approaching the present Midland Trail (U. S. 60) over the present Seneca Trail



—Courtesy the National Archives

COL. GEORGE CROOK

He defeated Gen. Henry Heth in the Battle of Lewisburg.

(U.S. 219), marching from the Narrows area toward Lewisburg. Crook hurriedly back-tracked to avoid being cut off from Charleston and other western points.

On May 22, Heth's soldiers drove in Union pickets met near the Greenbrier River. Early in the morning of May 23, Heth's forces reached the eastern crest above sleepy little Lewisburg.

In those days Lewisburg had a population of about 800, six stores, one newspaper, three churches, and one academy. The Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals met here regularly, and in the first red brick building built west of the Alleghenies the jurists could consult a well-stocked library. Next to it was the famous Frazier's Star Tavern. The town was about as much of a city as one could find on all the western waters.

Heth's left was placed on a line about where Holt Lane runs today, from Washington (Main) Street south to the Ronceverte road. His center stretched north on land lying above present Lee Street, behind the high school, and his right was in a wheat field on what is now the drill field of Greenbrier Military School.

Lee Street runs at a right angle to Washington Street, and in those days there were stout log fences along the upper side of Lee. But Heth did not move his men down quite far enough for the protection of the logs. Instead, they sought shelter in the wheat, which perhaps gave some secrecy but offered little protection.

At 5 a. m. Heth's artillery began bombarding the town and the Union camp on the opposite bluff, across the depression of the town proper which once gave Lewisburg the nickname of "Saucer Village."

At this daylight hour Crook's men were at breakfast, camped in the nearly level fields to either side of the Midland Trail, many of them behind the Greenbrier College property. Crook was taken by surprise. He sent his wagons west and formed his line of battle.

Heth had chosen the terrain and the time of attack. He confidently expected to win the day. In his report he gave his troop disposition: "As my regiments and batteries arrived they

were deployed as follows: Finney's battalion on the left, the 45th Regiment in the center, and the 22nd Virginia Regiment on the right; Lt. Col. Cook's battalion of dismounted men, and 8th Virginia Cavalry as the reserve."

Crook sent the 44th Ohio Volunteers, under Col. Samuel A. Gilbert, to form on the south side of Washington Street and advance up the hill toward Heth's left. They moved sturdily up the hill through the beautiful oak grove where Vansickler drive is today. They threatened to flank the Confederate left.

The Union left, which evidently formed up about where the courthouse now stands, was the 36th Ohio under Lt. Col. M. Clark. He wrote later he was "at the foot of a steep declivity having an altitude of some 50 feet and along the brow of which were several houses surrounded by enclosures beyond which the larger portion of the enemy's infantry, commanded by Gen. Heth in person, was formed." Clearly Clark was leading his men up present Randolph and Chestnut Streets to cross Lee.

Clark's companies, some 600 men, advanced under heavy fire to within about 40 yards of Heth's position. It is probable they took shelter behind the long fence which Heth's men might have used to advantage.

Heth directed Col. Finney to occupy the "small body of timber" on the left. This would have made it easier to repulse the Federal drive up the slope. But it meant crossing an open wheat field, situated evidently on what is now down the slope from the Oak Terrace Motor Lodge, between Dennis Street, Echols Lane and Holt Lane.

The three Union companies under Gilbert opened a severe fire on Finney's battalion. The men wavered and broke. Finney, as well as some of the captains, "threw themselves between the enemy and their retreating men, but threats and persuasions were alike unavailing. The result is, we mourn the loss of many a brave officer." So reported Heth to Maj. Gen. W. W. Loring that same evening.

With the left crumpling fast the Confederate center was forced to begin a withdrawal. The right moved back slowly to the top of the hill, then swiftly withdrew.

The Federals captured the Confederate artillery, tried to turn the guns on the retreating foe, perhaps with some effect.

Heth's rear guard had been rolling solid shot down "Hardscrabble Hill" (Washington Street), then a narrow and very steep road, to discourage a Union charge up the center. Now, they too, had to leave. Some 500 blue-clad riders made a spectacular cavalry charge up the hill to harass Heth's split forces clear to the Greenbrier River, some two and one-half miles away.

The Confederate forces could not all use the road. Most of them had to flee through heavily timbered, very rough terrain. But Crook feared to throw his entire command into the pursuit, not knowing what reserves Heth had nearby. Actually, all of Heth's forces were engaged in the action. The Confederates were able to cross the long covered bridge at Caldwell and burn it, then to get away via the Monroe Draft road to Union.

In his report Heth assumed blame for the disastrous engagement, but also blamed "the disgraceful behavior of three regiments and batteries" on the fact they were "filled with conscripts and newly officered under the election system." Crook also mentions in his report that ". . . a number of his troops are men who have been pressed into service under the state conscription, this is their first engagement, there is every reason to believe that the defeat will be to them very demoralizing."

Lewisburg's sympathies were predominantly with the South, and the people did not take kindly to the way the battle ended. There was even a bit of sniping from windows.

Like all battles, this one had its interesting and often odd sidelights. Its effect was far more important than any of the weary soldiers on either side could guess at the time.

II

RESIDENTS RECALLED EVENTS DURING BATTLE

Lewisburg did not change hands in 1861-65 as often as some towns in the Shenandoah Valley, but it was held variously first by one side, then the other.

The Great Buffalo Trail between the Atlantic Coast and the Valley of Virginia and the Ohio Valley crossed the Alleghenies through Lewisburg. Later this was to become the James River and Kanawha Turnpike, then the Midland Trail. But almost a century ago, it was in constant use by the contending armies.

Usually they avoided each other, either by chance or design. Citizens of the little town became used to seeing the Grays disappear over the hill to the east "and westward look and the land was blue." Or if the Union troops scurried over the western crest, soon the eastern hillside was gray.

Actually, there were a half dozen definite engagements in the general area: Dry Creek, or White Sulphur Springs, about 10 miles east; Droop Mountain, 28 miles north, most important battle fought in the state; two different engagements at Tutwiler Hill just west of town and one between that hill and Brushy Ridge—these are a constant source of confusion to historians; and the Battle of Lewisburg, described in part I of this story.

The latter was the only one actually fought in a town. Thirty years ago, I talked with the late Mercellus Zimmerman, whose hobby was collecting data on the town and region, had a cellar stocked with notes. Dr. Roy Bird Cook saw to it that the most valuable of these were preserved. I wish that I had talked more about the old days with Mr. Zimmerman, and taken notes on what he remembered. Andrew Price wrote in 1928 that, "I suppose the only living man who saw that battle is Mercellus Zimmerman. He was eleven years old and was out in the center of the battlefield during the whole fight riding a stick horse and playing that he was a horse soldier." I do not dispute the truth of that statement, but I cannot vouch for its accuracy.

Mr. Price led me to believe that Heth and Crook, the commanding officers were "West Point classmates." In fact, I have heard that many times from various people, but I checked the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which, of course, I should have done in the first place, and learned Heth graduated from the Point in 1847, Crook in 1852. Unless West Point has changed tremendously in the intervening years, the statement might better have read, "They were both members of 'the long gray line'."

So as to Mercellus Zimmerman and his stick horse, he did tell me personally he "rode" a broomstick horse all around the hill over there (pointing across to the western slope) behind the negro school building, where the Yankees were camped. I rode it all through their camp." But he didn't say this was on the day of the battle, and since the cannonading began at 5 a. m. and the action was over before many hours had passed, I am inclined to give my late friend, Andrew Price, credit for an enthusiastic pen and the ability to make history come alive. With that end in mind, perhaps it is not important whether or not the local legend about Mr. Zimmerman is 100 per cent accurate as to May 23, 1862.

When those dashing Union cavalrymen, some 500 blue-clad horsemen, charged up Hardscrabble Hill, one rode too close to the edge of the road. His horse slipped on a flagstone and fell sideways, rolling the rider over into the front yard of a residence. He was helped up, a bit embarrassed at being left behind by his comrades.

The actual fighting, once begun, lasted probably for only about thirty minutes. The Confederate loss was 80 killed, 100 wounded, 157 prisoners, 4 cannons, 25 horses and 300 stands of small arms taken by the enemy. The Federal loss was 13 killed, 60 wounded and 6 prisoners. Crook's original report read, "We lost some 10 killed, 40 wounded and 8 missing."

Heth reformed his army at Union and rested there for a month. Crook tried to bring on another battle on June 24 at Union, but Heth retired over Peters Mountain.

Heth's men on his left were in heavy timber out towards the home of the late Harry Frazier. However, when his men were unable to go across the wheat or rye field to take the knoll, in spite of the bravery of their officers, and the heavy fire poured into the ranks which caused a withdrawal and Heth's right wing to crumple, the timber was of little avail. In the hurried withdrawal, the Confederates lost 4 of their 6 cannon—Crook captured "two rifles and two smooth. . . ."

In her book, *Greenbrier Pioneers and Their Homes*, Ruth Woods Dayton gives a story told by the late Randolph Hock, proprietor of the General Lewis Hotel. A guest by the name of

Werner, from Springfield, Ohio, stated he was a member of the Ohio Regiment which captured a Confederate battery stationed in what is now the back yard of the hotel. He showed Hock where a mortar had been attached to the log cabin doorway and supported by rails fastened with a chain to the nearby oak tree. Werner explained that the gun, not too well fastened down, became displaced when fired. As it whirled around, its shot knocked off the southwest corner of the old Methodist brick church which still stands on Foster Street.

The Union soldiers were turning the cannon on its rightful owners, and with a high trajectory this could have happened. Local legend has always told of one shot which hit "in the vestibule of the Negro church."

According to Mr. Werner, the mortar was later placed in the courthouse yard in Springfield. I should check on that; it may still be there.

During the early bombardment, one shell went down the chimney of the Cary home and the Cary girls, the belles of the town, went to work while the battle was raging its fiercest, carrying out debris to keep the mansion from burning down.

Wounded soldiers were laid in the aisles of the town's churches. The Confederate dead were placed inside the Old Stone cemetery, later removed to a cross-shaped grave behind present Greenbrier College. This site, in a grove of trees, was once a popular rendezvous for Sunday afternoon strollers, back in the days before Sunday traffic jams on the highways, and many Lewisburg people today can recall walking there years ago. Recently civic groups have made progress on a plan to restore the old graveyard to something of its former sacred beauty.

The Union dead were buried temporarily in a field to the right of the Midland Trail west of town, later taken to their homes for permanent interment.

III

PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS TOLD OF BATTLE

There are two most interesting and unusual reports of battle incidents which should be recorded.

One is an excerpt from *Recollections of the Rev. John McElhenny, D. D.*, by Miss Rose Fry, granddaughter of the minister, published in 1893. Although only a little girl at the time of the battle, Miss Fry's account, written from memory years later, gives a vivid picture of the action which coincides with the two commanders' more impersonally phrased military reports.

The other is a tale which, so far as I can find out, has never been in print. It is a tragic as well as amusing story of one man's battle experience in 1862, told by him to a gracious lady now no longer living whose written account has fortunately come into my possession.

By May 23, 1862, date of the Battle of Lewisburg, citizens of the little western Virginia town were no longer strangers to the horrors of war.

Early in June, 1861, Gen. Henry A. Wise passed down the Kanawha Valley. Gen. Floyd was also sent into this section.

In September, Gen. Robert E. Lee with 10,000 men marched down from the northwest through Lewisburg and on to Sewell to encounter Gen. Rosecrans' force under Gen. Cox, who had command in the Valley. When winter set in, the Union troops withdrew and Gen. Lee's troops also departed.

Many of Lee's wounded were nursed in Lewisburg. "The town was filled to overflowing with sick and dying men. Every public building in the place was converted to their service. The pews were taken up in the lecture room of the (Old Stone) church, and its aisles filled with double rows of cots. The Academy, the Masonic Hall, the hotels, offices, and private dwellings were filled to overflowing."

So reported Rose W. Fry, granddaughter of Dr. John McElhenney, beloved pastor of Old Stone for 63 years. Her book, *Recollections of the Rev. John McElhenney, D. D.*, was published in 1893 by Whittet & Shepperson, Richmond, Va., that firm which has been responsible for so many excellent books. *Recollections* is now a collector's item. More than that, after 50 years it is still readable. I know of no higher tribute to a writer than that statement. The recollections of her childhood written by Rose Fry give us a vivid picture of those days, including "The War Period," as she titles Chapter X.

"The dead were laid out in the vestibule of the church. The long roll was heard beating the funeral march, every day, as some comrade was laid to rest without the glory of the battle-field."

She remembers that "in the spring of 1862 . . . the country between Charleston and Lewisburg was left open. . . . We had the mortification of seeing a detachment of Crook's brigade encamped on the hills west and north of the town. The attack was well planned, but the videttes driven in from Greenbrier bridge gave the alarm, and Crook was ready for the attack." Here the author seems to excuse Heth of failure to do a good job as commander.

Probably after every battle there were those who blamed a defeat on the laxity of command, either in preparation or in execution. Some of Heth's soldiers were outspoken in their censure of him, and, indeed, even today you can find people who blame him for the failure to recapture the town.

Probably the truth, as usual, lay somewhere in between: his right should have advanced to the cover of the heavy log fences on the upper side of Lee Street; his left should have been able to take the grove of timber as Heth expected; he was up against the most thoroughly trained and hardened Union outfit, Crook's brigade, in action on either side up to that time in the war.

"The citizens were refused permission to bury the Confederate dead. The bodies were laid out in the church until a trench, some 50 feet long, was dug, and in this enormous grave, without coffins, unknelled and unblessed, without ceremony, they were laid away." This was probably due to the fact that (then) Col. George Crook knew he was holding a town where nearly all the citizens were Southern sympathizers, did not know how many of the enemy might be close by in reserve, and was afraid of sniping.

He wrote in his official report May 23: "I regret to have to report that our wounded men passing to the rear were fired on from the houses and some killed. I have instituted a search, and shall burn all the houses from which firing was from and shall order a commission on those who are charged with firing, and

if found guilty, will execute them at once in the main street of this town as examples. I will send detailed report by mail."

It should be added that Crook makes no further mention of any shooting. Perhaps, he decided some Southern soldiers had been cut off and had taken temporary refuge in Lewisburg homes, and felt they were only continuing the fight. At any rate, there is no record of appointment of any commission, and no executions took place.

The Confederate dead, like the Union dead interred in a field west of town, were later reburied with due ceremony.

Mrs. Fry continued: "The battle was fought almost in the streets. At daybreak we were roused from slumber by the sound of firing. Almost immediately, my grandfather's voice was heard at the foot of the hall stairway, calling out, 'Susan, Susan, you had better all get up, there is going to be a battle!'

"Thus aroused, half dressed, the children flattened their faces against the window panes. From this position we had a good view of what was taking place on our left flank." The McElhenney parsonage stood on a knoll now just above the turn in Route 219 as it leads out of Lewisburg toward Ronceverte. The parsonage was southwest of the Confederate left flank and down hill from it. Today the home of Mrs. Wade Bell stands on the same spot.

"We could see the terrified Negroes running to the woods back of 'Mucklehenney's house'; we could see the puffs of smoke almost simultaneously with the rattle of musketry. We heard the discharge of artillery almost for the first time in our lives. It was an exciting, nay, even an alarming moment. The bullets whistled through the trees in the yard.

"The Yankees were interrupted in cooking their breakfast. Though taken by surprise, they behaved beautifully. They soon formed into line, and double-quicking it down the hillside, leveled the fences in the meadow, and my grandfather's wheat fields, and swept up the opposite slope to 'the grove,' which crowns the eastern hill, where the 45th was waiting to receive them. Col. Edgar's battalion was in the center, supporting Bryan's battery. Our left line soon broke under the onslaught from the enemy.

"On the opposite side of the town Col. Patton's regiment met with equal ill luck. The 22nd attacked the enemy's left flank, and a sharp fight went on in the fairgrounds (now the campus of Greenbrier Military School). For an hour or so a brisk firing was kept up, then it slackened and died away. Something told us the day had been lost. About 9 o'clock a cloud of smoke appeared on the horizon; it was from the bridge over the river, recklessly destroyed by Gen. Heth in his retreat.

"We could see the blue coats coming back leisurely down the hillside. Up to this time my father had been much struck with Gen. Heth's resemblance to Napoleon, but after this affair we heard no more of this fancied resemblance. Gen. Heth was short, rotund, and square-faced.

"Every house in the village was now searched. There were rumors that the town was to be burned, and the flames of a burning house seemed to corrobate this alarm."

The youngsters were interested in the loss of Donum, their Grandfather McElhenney's riding horse. A delegation of citizens visited Col. Crook in his tent. The Union commander was nursing a wounded heel, and this, along with all his other worries, probably did not help his good humor.

At any rate, although the townspeople pointed out how badly the aged minister needed the old horse to which he was accustomed, Donum was not returned. In what was perhaps one of his few statements showing a little venom, the usually kindly minister remarked that he "didn't wish the fellow who stole him any harm, but would not object if Donum should stumble and break his neck!"

Lewisburg citizens would pass on for generations stories of the day the battle was fought in the streets of the town.

The late Mrs. Emma B. Henderson wrote an account of the experience of H. R. Hodson, a member of Edgar's Battalion, for the Lewisburg Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1908. Mr. Hodson built and owned the property later occupied by Mrs. H. K. Withrow, and spent the last years of his life in Florida.

Hodson was camped at the Narrows of New River when ordered on a forced march to Lewisburg. A comrade, in a spirit

of mischief, loaded Hodson's gun. En route about Organ Cave, Hodson forgot his gun was loaded, and rammed down another full charge.

"Edgar's Battalion was stationed behind a rail fence running from the colored Methodist Church east. Mr. Hodson stuck the muzzle of his gun through the fence where he commanded a view of Main Street at the M. E. Church South (Lee and Washington) and awaited the appearance of a column of Federal troops which had been observed to leave the western part of town from about the Masonic Hall (now the County Library and Museum). . . . Mr. Hodson aimed his gun, intending to fire as soon as the head of the column emerged from behind the house now occupied by Mrs. Ellen McClung. He had not long to wait. The column emerged and Mr. Hodson pulled the trigger. . . ."

When Hodson came to, his comrades had withdrawn. The recoil had knocked him unconscious. He tried to get away up the hill, but about where the water tank now stands, in the new Garden Heights addition, he was captured. Hodson was imprisoned in D. J. Ford's old stone store on Main Street.

"The next morning a Federal officer came in to look at the prisoners, and jocularly remarked: 'What kind of powder do you fellows use now?'

" ' Why do you ask that question?' he was asked.

" 'Because yesterday . . . just as we reached the church . . . one shot was fired and I can swear that there was but one shot, and it killed two men and wounded a third.' "

Telling this story years later, Mr. Hodson was wont to add: "I could have told him that it nearly killed a fourth, but I thought it best to keep my mouth shut!"